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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2051
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2014
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1927
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000368

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/14/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: POISON PEN LETTERS LEAD TO CHURCH HARASSMENT

CLASSIFIED BY: TJACOBSON, AMBASSADOR, STATE, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[11](#). (C) SUMMARY: A disgruntled employee dismissed from the nongovernmental organization Operation Mercy published two poison pen letters in local media under a false pseudonym. The writer made allegations that Operation Mercy sold humanitarian aid for profit and imported religious literature and called for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and the State Committee on National Security to control Operation Mercy. The articles have spurred a court case against Operation Mercy, interrogations of a local Christian church's members, and a possible related break-in to the church. END SUMMARY.

[12](#). (SBU) On February 1, the government charged Operation Mercy for three violations of Tajik law: 1) holding classes without a license from the Ministry of Education; 2) importing and distributing religious literature and 3) operating outside of its charter and conducting illegal religious activity. The charges stemmed from an article most likely written by a disgruntled former employee in the weekly newspaper Tojikiston. A local judge delivered a statement on February 22 ordering Operation Mercy to suspend its classes and operations until it receives a license from the Ministry of Education.

[13](#). (C) Following the ruling, the Ministry of Education sent a letter to Operation Mercy declaring that it would not be given a license because it has been acting outside of its charter. The letter directly cites the two slanderous articles in Tojikiston newspaper as "evidence." According to Director Paul Linge, Operation Mercy had properly submitted all documentation in its license application to operate its English language courses and had a January letter from the Minister of Education stating that a license would be forthcoming.

[14](#). (C) The judge's statement did not mention the charges of distributing literature or operating outside of the organization's charter. Operation Mercy interprets the silence on this issue effectively as a dismissal of the charges. According to Article 22 of Tajikistan's current Law on Religion, the government permits religious groups to import, export and distribute religious literature in the country, as long as it is not considered "extremist" literature or causes physical harm in anyway. However, Operation Mercy is registered as a nongovernmental organization and not a religious organization. The organization is staffed primarily with U.S. citizen Christian

expatriates whose mission is faith-based. Since the ruling, Operation Mercy has filed an appeal, but has not received official notice about the appeal's status.

¶5. (C) The State Committee on National Security summoned members of a local church mentioned in one of the articles for questioning March 9 and 10. The church's night guard and pastor were questioned for three to four hours March 9 and an additional several hours on March 10. Security officials tried to establish a link between the local Tajik church and Operation Mercy. According to Operation Mercy's sources, one of the officials said during the course of the interrogation, "We need to 'cleanse' Tajikistan of these organizations." Officials demanded property and literature import documentation from the church. They also said that they would continue to interrogate the church's bookkeeper, and the night guard and pastor's girlfriends. The church continues to abide by the State Committee for National Security's request for information and interviews with staff.

¶6. (C) On the night of March 11, someone broke into the church, and stole a projector and money. They strewn paper and goods all over the office. No injuries were reported. The night guard was in another part of the compound at the time.

¶7. (C) According to Linge, Operation Mercy denies any official connection with the church. One Operation Mercy employee has given personal funds to the church's night guard. Operation Mercy also paid for fuel costs for the church's truck to make a delivery as well. Operation Mercy said it could not recall what the truck was delivering.

¶8. (SBU) In addition, three families with employees working at Operation Mercy were only given one month visas when they

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attempted to renew their one-year Tajik visas.

COMMENT:

¶9. (C) Although the visa denials and church break-in cannot be directly linked to the harassment against Operation Mercy, they are likely connected. Previous Operation Mercy (also formerly known as Central Asia Development Association, or CADA) employees faced problems with the security apparatus for proselytizing and a December article published in a regional newspaper in Soghd quoted an unnamed security official criticizing Operation Mercy. It is unclear whether Operation Mercy or its staff have been proselytizing or distributing religious literature. However, if it has been operating outside of its charter, these charges should be brought out in light and properly processed through the legal system. The only official charge that has stuck is that Operation Mercy is conducting English classes without a license. The Ministry of Education should not base its refusal to grant a license based on unverified articles published in a state-sponsored newspaper. English classes and computer trainings are a valuable service that the organization provides.

¶10. (C) The harassment Operation Mercy faces is a classic example of post-Soviet security agency tactics to scare nongovernmental organizations. Security officials have also repeatedly questioned employees of the U.S.-funded nongovernmental organizations National Democratic Institute and IREX in the past. Targeting the country's own local churches means it is also impinging on freedom of religion. Post is in close contact with other churches and minority religious groups in Tajikistan to gauge whether this is a sign of a broader trend.

END COMMENT.

JACOBSON